

Teaching with Primary Sources to Prepare Students for College, Career, and Civic Life

Introduction

The formal journey to become a social studies teacher begins in the methods classroom. We enter ready to connect our content area interests and prior experiences as social studies students with the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed to become effective social studies educators. Primary sources are significant tools for making those connections. They heighten interest in social studies content. They sharpen content-area expertise. They reinforce and enable authentic inquiry experiences. Strategies that feature primary sources can build pedagogical knowledge and skills.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the Library of Congress are proud to present a special online text for methods faculty, their pre-service teachers, and all those interested in teaching with primary sources through the social studies disciplines. As the project leads for this text, we wanted to share how important methods instruction and primary sources were to our own development and training as educators.

Lee Ann's Story

My social studies methods professor at the University of Colorado, John Zola, was fabulous! He was enthusiastic, creative, and honest about the realities of classroom teaching. He inspired and empowered me and my classmates when he told us that during our careers, we would certainly be teaching future entrepreneurs, biologists, hairdressers, engineers, laborers, writers, and more—but he insisted that we never forget that for all of them, their social studies classes (our classes!) would be the most important ones they would ever take. This is because, he explained, their social studies classes are where students come to understand civil society and where they become engaged citizens. More than 30 years later, I still remember how proud his words made me feel about the profession I had chosen. I also remember him teaching from the “back” of the room in one class meeting and challenging us to think creatively about the layout of our classrooms. And I still remember many of the teaching strategies he used with our class, modeling what we would eventually do with our students to capture their attention and inspire learning.

One strategy in particular that he shared involved a powerful primary source. It was a literacy test given to individuals in Alabama prior to passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Professor Zola administered the test to our class and led us to believe that our performance on it would influence our grade in his course. We, of course, protested and he eventually

explained that the questions had actually been used to suppress voting. While our scores would not count in his class, actual scores had for many would-have-been voters. During that particular class, something just clicked for me, and primary sources as teaching tools have played an important role in my career ever since.

It was also through my methods class that I learned about the value of professional associations and was first introduced to the National Council for the Social Studies!

Larry's Story

My social studies methods professor at Union Graduate College (now part of Clarkson University), Rick Reynolds, was also my outstanding mentor teacher! My graduate program included a full-year teaching internship, and I was placed in Mr. Reynolds' 7th-grade social studies class from September through June, with a break in December to intern in a high school Global Studies class. From the beginning, Mr. Reynolds cultivated my interest in primary sources. He often taught "beyond the textbook," adopting computers and other educational technology for historical research and classroom use before they became common in many schools, and using primary source handouts to ask questions and challenge assumptions before "inquiry" was a common social studies term. He modeled primary sources as a key ingredient for lesson plans and taught our methods class strategies to scaffold questions when using primary sources to study the past.

At the end of my internship year, I had just been hired for my first full-time position; Mr. Reynolds opened his file cabinet and invited me to take a copy of every primary source, activity, assessment, and teaching strategy he kept or developed. For the remainder of my teaching career, Mr. Reynolds' primary source packets, lesson plans, and teaching strategies formed the core of my own classroom materials, impacting all of the students I had the honor of teaching.

It was through my methods class that I became aware of the Library of Congress as a world-class resource for teachers. Even in the early days of the Internet, when I had to reserve space in the school library months in advance for research projects, the Library of Congress was among the first classroom resources my students and I consulted when working with primary sources and exploring national and state history and geography.

Methods and Primary Sources Come Together

We suspect—and we hope—that many teachers have stories like ours. While the names and places may differ, each speaks to the importance of dedicated methods professors and mentor teachers and the value of engaging methods courses.

It is our hope that this volume, written by individuals who have all served as methods professors, will provide others with ideas and inspiration and contribute to the importance and value of the methods course experience.

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